CHAPTER 5

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

*C*ollection system owners and operators must communicate effectively with municipal authorities, state and federal regulators, and the general public. Enhancing communication is an integral part of optimizing an operation and maintenance program.

Information for this chapter was primarily obtained from the following sources: U.S. EPA's *Guide for Evaluating Capacity, Management, Operation, and Maintenance Programs for Sanitary Sewer Collection Systems* (DRAFT) and *Draft Notice of Proposed Rulemaking—NPDES Permit Requirements for Municipal Sanitary Sewer Collection Systems, Municipal Satellite Collection Systems, and Sanitary Sewer Overflows;* U.S. DHHS's *Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials;* and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection's *O&M Newsletter.*

5.1 Working with the Public

Improving public awareness is important because the public can play a key role in improving collection system performance. The public is a key stakeholder that should have an opportunity to identify its concerns and expectations regarding the performance of collection systems and potential public health and environmental risks.

The public does not always understand the benefits to be derived from collection system projects that may significantly raise their user rates and require temporary or permanent disruption. Public officials in turn may not be willing to counter public sentiment. Therefore, it is important to engage and inform stakeholders early and maintain communication throughout the project process.

Education is a vital tool that can eliminate potential barriers or opposition related to funding and siting, provide support for the project, and reduce overall costs and disruptions. The public is usually more willing to pay for improvements it can see and understand.

The ability to establish constructive communication will be determined, in large part, by whether an audience perceives you to be trustworthy and believable. Consider how they form their judgments and perceptions. Key factors in assessing trust and credibility are: empathy and caring; competence and expertise; honesty and openness; and dedication and commitment.

5.1.1 Outreach

As stated earlier, building public support can be challenging. Holding an "Open House" can be an effective tool for building support, especially for larger system improvement projects requiring public "buy-in." The difference between an Open House and a public meeting is that a public meeting allows a project to be formally presented to all attendees at once, while an Open House allows for more one-on-one interaction. An Open House may include relevant displays and handouts, but not formal presentations.

FIVE RULES FOR BUILDING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

1. **Accept and involve the public as a partner.** Work with and for the public to inform, dispel misinformation and, to every degree possible, allay fears and concerns.

2. **Appreciate the public's specific concerns.** Statistics and probabilities don't necessarily answer all questions. Be sensitive to people's concerns and worries on a human level. Do not overstate or dwell on negatives, but do empathize with the public and provide answers that respect their humanity.

3. **Be honest and open.** Once lost, trust and credibility are almost impossible to regain. Never mislead the public by lying or failing to provide information that is important to their understanding of issues.

4. **Work with other credible sources.** Conflicts and disagreements among organizations and credible spokespersons create confusion and breed distrust. Coordinate your information and communications efforts with those of other legitimate parties.

5. **Meet the needs of the media.** Never refuse to work with the media. The media's role is to inform the public, which will be done with or without your assistance. Work with the media to ensure that the information they are providing the public is as accurate and enlightening as possible. Designate a media coordinator and have other employees refer media questions to this person.

In addition to public meetings and open houses, there are a number of options available for presenting information to the public. These include direct mail, an insert into a water/sewer bill, publishing a notice in a local newspaper, or an addendum to other existing printed materials or notices such as signs or public health advisories posted at recreation areas. The internet is likely to be an increasingly desirable medium for making information available to the public. One option is to make the information available on the municipality's website.

Citizen advisory committees also work very well for community outreach. These committees include members of the community who volunteer to be a liaison between the municipality, consulting engineers, and the public. The committee mechanism assures the public that their concerns are being addressed. This provides "buy-in" to the process and the results.

5.1.2 Signage

An important form of outreach and communication involves the posting of chronic overflow locations. Long-term posting might be appropriate in locations where releases from the collection system are likely to re-occur, including emergency overflow structures, pump stations experiencing releases, and locations where remediation and rehabilitation require capital planning and construction over a long period of time.

Posting is also appropriate at locations where public exposure is more likely, such as swimming areas or parks. Posting at selected public places (e.g., a public information center at a park, beach, or school) might be appropriate in cases where a relatively narrow segment of the public is likely to be affected and can be reached via the public places selected for display.

Posting locations should be identified in consultation with other affected entities, such as local, State, or tribal public health officials; and parks and recreation officials. This consultation would occur as part of an integrated public outreach process.

Information provided in posted areas should include information such as the following:

- When exposure at this location could pose risks (e.g., "during and immediately after heavy rains").

- Where exposure may be a problem (e.g., "within 500 feet of this sign").

- The nature of the problem (e.g., "this sewer may overflow and discharge raw sewage").

- Why exposure should be avoided ("bacteria may cause illness").

- How to avoid exposure ("do not swim or wade in this area").

- Where to get more information.

- Request for public assistance in reporting discharges ("if you see a discharge from this pipe, please call [specified phone number]").

The information would need to be targeted to the potentially affected population, including consideration for non-English-speaking individuals.

5.1.3 Alternative Dispute Resolution

Collection systems agencies and the communities they serve often have to deal with complicated projects and environmental decisions, which can hinge on difficult economic, environmental, and quality of life trade-offs. Debates about these issues can become divisive and lead to conflict, deadlock, or long and expensive legal proceedings. Alternative dispute resolution is used to describe a range of techniques that can help people settle their disputes without having to resort to litigation or to reach settlement more efficiently within existing litigation proceedings. It is based on the concept that people who are involved in a controversy are the ones best able to develop a reasonable and enduring solution because they know their own needs and interests.

Most alternative dispute resolution techniques involve the use of a neutral third party, who helps orchestrate the process and ensures that it is implemented fairly and that everyone is heard and shares in the decision making process.

Constructive engagement, conflict assessment, facilitation, mediation, and consensus building are all alternative dispute resolution techniques. These techniques offer the opportunity to improve communication among stakeholders and can promote better relations among groups that have been at odds. These techniques can save all stakeholders time, money, and stress in the long run if used appropriately and conducted efficiently.

5.2 Working with Local Government

Often, resistance by chief financial officers and other upper management executives can be a critical barrier to implementing collection system improvement projects. The following outline illustrates the kind of information that needs to be presented to successfully gain approval for such a project.

The information below is useful for effectively presenting a project to an authorizing or approval authority at an oversight board or local government meeting. In deciding who should be invited to the meeting, consideration should be given to impact on budgets as well as on operations. It is most important that all interested parties be fully informed before the meeting, so they can be prepared to participate. If your project gets approved, funding may have to come from other activities; those managers must be fully involved before your presentations, if you are to avoid having them oppose your project.

Besides gaining the cooperation of internal management, it might be wise to gain the support of outside parties, who might lend additional credibility to your proposal.

Your presentation to management must be tailored to the scope of the project and the management style of your leadership, and must be keyed to achieving a decision. The best idea is to make the individual in your management scheme that can ultimately approve the project the center of your presentation.

Your presentation should present all of the necessary information as concisely as possible. Do not waste valuable time with unimportant details. The more irrelevant details you furnish, the greater the likelihood that someone will start to nit-pick. This may well divert the decision-maker's attention from the true issues at hand.

5.2.1 Effective Project Presentation

The following outline suggests a format for presenting your project to management.

State the purpose of the presentation.

You want everyone attending your presentation to focus on the problem you will present, knowing that a decision will have to be made. If attendees think they are there for an information briefing, they may easily miss some of the points that will critically affect the decision.

State the problem to be corrected.

What are the existing conditions that make it important that the project be considered? What costs are involved that can be reduced? How do existing conditions affect production, staffing, maintenance, and the bottom line?

Describe the scope of the project being proposed.

As briefly as possible and using a minimum of detail describe what the project will consist of in terms of equipment, labor, time and cost to implement. This part of the presentation will help the decision-maker and other key players get a fast understanding of what you want to accomplish and how.

State the benefits to be achieved by implementing the project.

Using simple data summaries and graphical displays, explain how the project will cure the problems you earlier laid out in discussing existing conditions and improvements to the bottom line. Emphasize reducing costs.

Clearly state the cost of the implementation.

Accurately state what it will cost to perform the project. You must examine all of the direct costs involved, and also the indirect costs, as well as a percentage (e.g., 10 percent) for contingencies. Will there be additional costs?

Explain any effect the project will have on operations.

While this project is going on, will there be any adverse effect on operations? If so, how will it be accommodated? Has the resultant cost of any such impact been included in the estimate of the cost of the implementation?

Present the effect on the budget.

Any significant new project will affect the budgeting process. If the project is being sought for the current budget year, the effect is likely to be both large and widespread, having an effect on more than just one part of the organization. If the project is for a future budget year, the planning may be simplified, but the effect may be felt throughout the organization. Unless a windfall of new revenue exists to fund the project, funding will have to come from existing budget items that will have to be reduced. Advance coordination with the likely targets of these budget transfers can help in getting approval. It may be necessary to clearly demonstrate a long-term benefit to be derived to convince a senior manager that he or she can accept a short-term loss of funds to support the project.

Much care should go into analyzing the Return on Investment (ROI), that is, the time over which the savings to be realized by the project equals the cost of implementing it. The shorter the ROI, the more likely the project will be approved. This part of the presentation may be a good time to compare graphically costs against time and present the expected returns to clearly illustrate the ROI. It is also a good time to restate any reduction in cost per unit of production to be realized under the project.

A major barrier to project approval is often a lack of management awareness of real operational costs. Collection/estimation of these costs, and simple graphical displays in your presentation can help highlight the need for the project.

Provide a coordinated implementation plan.

The best plan, implemented poorly, can be a total failure. Coordination between and among departments; realistic work schedules; accommodation for the unexpected; clearly stated, achievable milestones; and the assignment of a fully accountable project manager are essential to making the project a success. "What if" brainstorming should always be included in the planning. Under best conditions all of the affected activities should be in agreement on the plan before the decision briefing is presented. If such agreement is not possible in advance, the plan should include an early milestone related to achieving that level of agreed-to coordination. The timing for the project and each of the milestones are critical to the decision process. The latest date a decision can be useful must be made clear. Normally, this time estimate should allow management some time to consider

options and alternatives. However, it must be made clear that the reason the project is being sought is because a decision is needed, and it is needed by a specific date.

Summarize the project and ask for the decision.

Close the sale. Summarize the need for the project and timing, review the cost/benefit analysis, lead the thought process to conclude the need for a decision, and ask that the decision be made.

Provide a minimum of complicated details in the briefing itself. It is a good idea to have on hand as much hard data detail as possible, in case it is requested. Spreadsheets and reports, process studies, cost data and analysis are all valuable backup to your presentation. However, avoid using these materials in the presentation itself to avoid confusion. Any data that you provide should be in a prepared format, and it should not be cluttered with ancillary, irrelevant data that may mislead or divert thinking. You should always remember that the two most critical parameters in play during your presentations are time and focus. Time is critical because the longer it takes to "make your case"—the less likely you are to get the decision you want. Focus is important because you do not want the decision-maker to be distracted from the very specific goal of implementing your project.

The most important factor in gaining the approval you seek is coordinating in advance with all of the affected managers and key players within your organization. If you can get them to approve the concept informally in advance of your presentation to senior management, a favorable decision will be much more easily achieved. In most cases, it will be very difficult to get unanimous coordinated approval from all the players. And remember that because of the competition for funding, one or more of the key players will suffer some form of budget impact.

5.3 Communicating in a Crisis

A destabilized information environment (such as an ongoing large-scale SSO event) can make it very important to give thought and consideration to what message needs to be delivered before making any public comment—be it a 30-second statement to a news person or a 30-minute news conference to a roomful of media representatives.

- Assess the environment into which you are introducing information. Gain a sense of the public's general attitude toward the situation and tailor your presentation accordingly.

- Review your remarks to gauge the probable impact that your words will have on the situation and adjust them as necessary.

- Understand your audience.

- Don't speak unless you are comfortable doing so. Most communications mistakes are made by those who are not prepared to speak but feel compelled to do so anyway. If confronted with a demand for a quick answer, have the confidence to say, "I would like to answer that question later."

- Develop press releases to provide to the media.

People often fail to effectively communicate due to a lack of clear communications goals and key messages to support them. Setting such goals and identifying support messages are decisions

that should be made prior to the issuing of any public comment and are especially important in a crisis.

Once goals and messages have been established, the challenge becomes one of delivery and ensuring that messages are heard and goals are met.

Scientific information will be more useful to the audience and greater communication success will be achieved if the information provided is relevant and easily understood. To help audiences understand the issues, create well-targeted messages. Also be sure to use clear, non-technical language to discuss risks and other specific information indicating the nature, form, severity, or magnitude of the risk.

5.3.1 Communication Planning and Preparation

Much of the success of effective risk communications is predicated on the amount of work that goes into planning and preparing for a crisis event.

Risk communication efforts should receive the same preparation as any other possible emergency. Lists of contacts with addresses and phone numbers should be drawn up (and updated regularly) and fact sheets and background materials should be prepared. The tools and information needed to communicate fully and effectively when a crisis erupts have to be readily accessible.

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Guidance for Communication Planning and Preparation

- Form a risk communication team.
- Designate a team leader and assign responsibilities to team members.
- Develop a risk communication protocol.
  - Who decides when a crisis exists, and what are each team member's responsibilities?
  - Who speaks to the media/public on what subjects and at whose direction?
- Develop and maintain lists.
  - Primary contacts/experts for key offices and issue areas.
  - Secondary contacts/experts for key offices and issue areas.
  - Media lists.
- Identify information needs and develop appropriate fact sheets and background materials.

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The more questions that can be anticipated and answered ahead of time in a fact sheet the better. This is especially true for information regarding high visibility public health issues such as overflowing collection systems.

5.4 More Information

Additional information on public involvement and alternative dispute resolution is available from the U.S. EPA's Office of Policy, Economics, and Innovation. Their website is *www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement.*

The New England Water Environment Association (NEWEA) has developed a guidance document for working with the media titled *Meet the Press—A Guide to Communicating with the Media.* The document can be downloaded from its website: *www.newea.org.*

CHAPTER 5 REFERENCES

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